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SUBJECT: WOMEN ACTIVISTS PUSH FOR INCLUSION IN
REINTEGRATION PLANNING PROCESS

REF: KABUL 689

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Representatives from the Afghan Women's Network met February 23 with Masoom Stanekzai, the Afghan government's current lead on reintegration efforts, at his invitation, to voice their concerns over GIROA's reintegration and reconciliation plans. Stanekzai opened the meeting by explaining GIROA's reintegration efforts, the difference between reintegration and reconciliation, GIROA's way forward in developing a reintegration program and soliciting their input. The group called for women's participation in all negotiations, and requested additional guarantees that women's rights and participation in society will be protected as discussions move forward. They also briefly addressed concerns that non-Pashtun ethnic groups will not be protected, and that development projects will focus too heavily on the south. Stanekzai was receptive to the women's concerns and requested further input in the form of a two-page paper. The meeting was a positive initial step in improving coordination between the government and civil society on reconciliation and reintegration. The Embassy will continue to support civil society and press the government to listen to and address their concerns. End Summary.

More Than Just a Seat at the Table

¶2. (SBU) Eight members of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), a civil society organization with 70 women's NGOs and 3000 individual women activist members, met with Masoom Stanekzai at his request to understand GIROA's reintegration policy and way forward on developing a reintegration program. They pushed for the inclusion of women in the reintegration and reconciliation process. The assembled AWN representatives, including former Minister of Women's Affairs candidate Palwasha Hassan and 2007 International Women of Courage Award winner Mary Akrami, told Stanekzai they wanted transparent negotiations, with no "behind the curtains" deals. In particular, the women sought an equal and active role throughout the planning and implementation process. They judged women's role in government over the last eight years as only symbolic, and implored Stanekzai to involve them constructively in the peace process.

Constitutional Rights Not Enough

¶3. (SBU) Stanekzai assured the AWN representatives that the constitution would protect women's rights throughout the reintegration and reconciliation process. However, the women were skeptical that the constitution alone offers sufficient protection. They pointed to the limited political power women currently wield, including the lack of high-level government positions, as evidence that more needs to be done to protect and promote women's rights. The women were particularly concerned that former Taliban and Hezb-e Islami

would influence the government to enforce their interpretations of Shari'a law. The conversation grew increasingly animated as the women asked what would prevent a future government from closing girls schools, limiting women's employment opportunities, and forcing women back behind closed doors. The women told Stanekzai the government needs to make a strong statement on their commitment to protecting women's rights.

14. (SBU) The AWN representatives voiced particular concern that former Taliban would be appointed or elected to high-level government positions. Stanekzai brushed over a question on what mechanism would prevent Taliban from joining the government as MPs or in other influential roles. However, in a February 3 press conference he told journalists that the Afghan government is "open and transparent," and that once former opposition members have accepted the constitution they can become "officials, politicians, even president."

Concern for Minorities

15. (SBU) As leaders among civil society activists, the AWN representatives took the opportunity to voice broader reintegration concerns in addition to the role of women. They urged Stanekzai and his reintegration team to think about how former Taliban will live and work alongside non-Pashtuns. The women also shared a frequent complaint from civil society that reintegration and reconciliation efforts, which will focus on the south, will further tip the

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balance of development resources and efforts away from the safer provinces in the central and northern regions.

Government Receptive, Now Need Action

16. (SBU) Stanekzai was receptive to AWN's concerns, and began the meeting by telling the collected interlocutors that he intended the meeting to be the beginning of a longer discussion. He noted that some Afghans believe women oppose reconciliation, and said the dialogue would prove that women in Afghanistan are supporting the process. This comment could reflect a disconnect between Stanekzai and civil society; civil society is engaging in discussions not to prove their support, but to play a decision-making role in the process. Stanekzai requested the group submit a two-page paper summarizing their concerns and proposed input for the reintegration process, which his team would take into consideration alongside the Ministries' papers (Reftel) as they formulate the reintegration program.

17. (SBU) There is still need for the Afghan government to more clearly define its way ahead in developing and implementing reintegration and reconciliation efforts. The AWN representatives expressed their concern to Stanekzai that the Peace Jirga would be a constitutional Loya Jirga, allowing the opposition to bring amendments limiting women's rights to the constitution. Stanekzai reassured them it would be a Peace Jirga, not a Loya Jirga, but the group insisted that President Karzai had referred to it as a Loya Jirga several times. In a follow-on meeting with AWN representatives and Embassy officers, the women again asked whether reintegration and reconciliation are one process. A number of concerns they addressed in their meeting with Stanekzai were more relevant to the reconciliation process. The differences between reintegration and reconciliation, and whether there will be a joint or separate policies, are not yet clear to the Afghan public.

Embassy Engagement and Support

18. (SBU) While numerous civil society organizations have voiced legitimate concerns to the Embassy about reconciliation and reintegration, none has been as organized and proactive as AWN. AWN has held regular meetings with women activists since the London Conference, has written documents articulating their concerns, and has plans to reach out to additional Embassies, ISAF, government ministries, and President Karzai. AWN representatives are appreciative of, and have requested, additional Embassy and international support in directing attention to women's issues, but are determined to remain in the lead on conversations with the government. AWN's meeting with Stanekzai was a positive first step towards greater cooperation between the government and civil society. However, AWN is unlikely to accept that submitting a two-page paper on their views suffices; rather, they rightfully expect women to be involved in the negotiating process.

19. (SBU) The Embassy has been actively engaging both civil society and the government to facilitate dialogue on reintegration and reconciliation. A recent Embassy dinner which brought together Minister Stanekzai, IDLG Director Popal, AIHRC, and USIP representatives will hopefully serve as a springboard for further cooperation. Stanekzai's meeting with AWN is evidence that our repeated message to the government that they must not cut civil society and women out of the reintegration and reconciliation planning process is starting to be heard. SRAP Senior Advisors Rina Amiri and Barnett Rubin's discussion of civil society's role in reintegration and reconciliation during a recent string of meetings with senior Afghan government officials highlighted to the Afghan government the extreme importance the USG places on this issue. The Embassy will continue to work with civil society and the government to ensure that they are sharing information and responding to each others' concerns.

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